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ABSTRACT

A video tape of a freshman composition student at the University of Arizona shows the difficulty she has faced in writing classes because of her black dialect. Her instructor points out that the student, after some of the readings in class, recognizes that she has learned code switching on her own to survive in the educational system; this learning to switch codes might have been facilitated by the educational system. Similarly, another instructor in English, on viewing the same video tape, reminisces on his own frustrations as a minority student, yet he notes that issues of style are more complicated than they appear, perhaps more complicated than the taped writing student realizes. Style is not merely the form of the content; rather it is the point of mediation between form and content. When writers study style, they search for principles to unify their acts and interpretations. They study the way ideologies come to life in specific language situations. Style lives at the point where writers translate ideology into, as Kenneth Burke would say, symbolic acts. The two composition instructors together have developed a curriculum that they hope will highlight the culturally bound, conventional aspects of style. Writing curriculums might also be developed that would study various and contrasting discourse communities and communicative context. Kochman's "Black and White Styles in Conflict" could be used to focus on race as a window for studying language. (Includes the course description.) (TB)

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**Un-rapping the Invisible Man:
Black and White Styles in Conflict**

A Panel Presentation

by Jane E. Hindman and Michael A. Robinson

*(including
The Conventions of Distance:
The Effects of Schooling on Style*

by Michael A. Robinson)

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Unrapping the Invisible Man: Black and White Styles in Conflict

RESPONDENT (Jane E. Hindman):

Welcome, everybody, glad to see you here today. We are going to do this session somewhat differently from what you may be used to. At least let's hope it's different, right? For one thing, we'll only be having two presenters; for another one of those speakers will be giving her presentation on videotape. In my role as respondent, I will be jumping in from time to time to give you some context on certain issues as well as my reaction. If everything goes according to plan, we will have plenty of time for your responses and questions at the end; your feedback is what we're most interested in hearing today.

We're going to begin with our videotaped speaker. Her name is Tahirah Akbar; she is currently a sophomore at Arizona State University--the notorious rival of the University of Arizona. Tahirah transferred to ASU after her first year at UA. However, at the time that this tape was made--just shy of a year ago--Tahirah had been a student in my English 100, basic writing course. I had been intrigued all semester with the questions and issues she raised in our English 100 class and had kept in touch with her even after our class ended. When I discovered that she was transferring, I asked her if she would be interested in participating on a panel with Michael and me and also willing to let me make a videotape of her reading her paper and answering some questions. When we talked about who would be the audience for her presentation (you all as well as the group of teachers--including high

school and elementary teachers who heard a version of this presentation at NCTE in November), she excitedly agreed. "You know I will want to do that," she said, "because that's what I'm about. It's important to help other African-Americans to know about themselves and have confidence at school, and it's important that other teachers know what happens for black kids at school." It seems pretty clear then what his her purpose in serving on this panel.

She begins her presentation by reading a paper she wrote. The piece was her response to the last assignment in our 100 course: Use your personal experience to support an argument about some aspect of the educational system in the U.S. During the course of the semester, students had written other essays using their personal experience as the means to develop their ideas, but this essay was their first argument structured as such. During this unit, we all read Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundaries and had spent lots of class time discussing his views of education and students corroborated or negated his examples. Tahirah was one of the most active contributors to these--as well as all--conversations we had in class. She was one of many students who chose to write her essay in the form of a problem/solution kind of argument.

One of the things that is most interesting to me about the papers that are generated in this unit is that the solutions are posed by the people most affected by the problem but not really most likely to be the ones to enact the solutions. Initially, I felt justified in asking Tahirah to elaborate on just how her call for teaching methods would be answered; I realize now, however, that conceiving that elaboration is more our job than hers. After her reading, Tahirah responds to Michael's and my request for her to tell us more about her experiences in an LD class. The name of her paper is "Who You Calling Dumb?"

One thing that I notice in this last section of Tahirah's talk is that her explanation of her educational background has several things in common with those of, say, Keith Gilyard in Voices of the Self and--not surprisingly--of Mike Roses' Lives: she gives the salient details of the setting of her schools, of the larger context of her educational experiences. For instance, she talks about the "lily white" neighborhood of her Phoenix school and the outdated and "behind" textbooks and curriculum of her projects schools. Yet, the research that others of us do on educational problems and solutions often do not include these aspects of context.

Some of you may also have noticed--I know that many in the audience at NCTE certainly did--the way that Tahirah describes her teachers telling her "No, that's not right." when she wrote how she talked and talked how she wrote. This lack of respect for her dialect is disturbing.

In the next sections of her presentation, you will hear her talking about how her dialect made her different from some other students, about how her teachers wondered what is wrong with this child, and about how she has self-labeled "problems" with dialect and with writing. To people who don't know this woman, it might be easy to assume that she thinks that she herself is the problem. But I don't think that's an accurate reading, and I want to see if I can convince you to agree.

When, for instance, I consider her enthusiasm in participating in this project and her stated purpose in doing so ("You know that helping people understand African Americans is

what I am about."), I see emerge a much different reading of her description of her "problem." In the following discussion that concludes her presentation, I believe her main point to be that her demonstrated and self-taught ability to code switch could have been facilitated by the school system. She managed to learn it on her own, but the school could've helped her out. And she wants to see that kind of assistance offered in the future. Her solutions in her paper focused on the ways that schools and teachers can solve these problems, solutions that she sees as necessary to point out because apparently no one knows how to do what she sees as pretty obvious.

Consider, for instance, her remarks in this next section when I ask her about a moment of communicative trouble that she and I had. "People have two different definitions of what's right and what's wrong," she says. "I expect teachers to know these things." What she tactfully doesn't say is that they don't. In the sections entitled "Crossing Boundaries," Tahirah talks about how important to her were the few teachers she did have who did understand her predicament in having to shift codes and backgrounds. In specific, she mentions Joni Clarke, a UA instructor in the Med Start, a summer program our institution offers for minority students still in high school but considering a career in medicine and wanting to get a head start of the math and english skills they'd be needing in college. In this section of her presentation, Tahirah demonstrates an excellent understanding of what many have called the "double consciousness" of bi-lingual and bi-dialectical speakers: she says she had to use "both of my things" and talks about the lack of support the educational system provides for people needing to develop both sides of a dialectical self. To me, this discussion reveals a young woman very aware of the differences between "her" dialect and the "school" dialect but also aware that she wants to sacrifice neither and that the school

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system needs to attend to the needs of other students who want what she wants.

PRESENTER MICHAEL ROBINSON READS HIS PAPER "The Conventions of Distance:
The Effects of Schooling on Style."

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Michael A. Robinson
University of Arizona
4C's/March 18, 1994

The Conventions of Distance: The Effects of Schooling on Style

When we taped Ms. Akbar's presentation, and when I first watched the tape, I felt very positive about her message and how she's handled the racism she has faced in her education. The fact that she still has an interest in education makes her something of a success story. Those factors, along with the self-awareness she shows -- notable for a first-year college student -- persuaded me then that she had resolved the conflict between the dialect of school that of family and home.

But viewing the tape since, I question my sense of resolution. It isn't that I doubt her strength and ability. But I believe that to resolve competing dialects takes longer and involves more struggle than I wanted to admit. When I watch the tape now, I still admire how far she's traveled, but I see a distance that remains for her and me.

That distance has everything to do with style and how we are schooled in it. So I want to offer you the story of my own stylistic schooling, which, though different from hers, ends with similar conflicts. I want to talk about how that schooling, which took place both in the classroom and in my home, influenced me, and how redefining style has helped to alter that influence.

I grew up with what I considered an unaccented voice, and I was long proud of that fact. I liked the confusion about my roots and origins. I thought it made me cosmopolitan, and I had a sense that it might open doors otherwise closed to me.

Oh, I heard the accented voices all around me, the dialects, the clips and diphthongs, the flat a's, the trilling r's, the "he be" and "they be," the ain'ts. My father was a career Army sergeant; I was born in Frankfurt and I'm told my first words were in German. I lived all over the Western U.S. and for a time in Panama, and in my family nearly everyone read, from my father's Matt Helm novels and my mother's Ladies Home Journal and Redbook to the statistics that my younger brother devoured from the newspaper sports pages.

Two of my older brothers were in love with naming things, generating names for themselves and mocking names for the rest of us. The ability to play with language, both written and oral, in argument and humor, meant the difference between being laughed with or laughed at in my family, a difference that could be painful at times.

But to speak or write other than standard English around my mother was to invite deeper scorn. She is a black woman, but born and raised in the colonial experience that was (and continues to be) Panama, and she was obsessed with the two markers of that colonial experience: race and language. She still carries the ambivalence of colonization: at times fiercely patriotic about her race and native country, at times speaking of Panamanians as though they were children incapable of ruling themselves. She is bilingual, but she never taught us more than a few words of

Spanish, and she ridiculed any language she viewed as non-standard, whether it be English or Spanish.

But she couldn't shield me from the accented voices, including hers, and I listened though I couldn't speak in them.

I remember, from Panama, traveling in our station wagon at night back to our house in the Canal Zone, the American enclave that bisected the country, after visiting my relatives in the Republic. We spent those visits watching Spanish TV, listening to my mother and grandmother and Panamanian relatives speaking in Spanish, conversations that we -- the American cousins -- were shut out of. My cousin, a year or two younger than me, was bilingual, and had an ease with the adults, especially my grandmother who spoke little English, that I envied.

I also remember an earlier time, in third grade, the semester I spent in a Colorado Springs elementary school. The neighborhood we lived in was predominantly black, and my adeptness in the school styles of language and behavior gave me an in with my white teacher just as it opened a distance from many of my classmates. I knew that their voices weren't mine, though I didn't know what to make of it.

Raised as I was in predominantly white environments, and influenced by my mother's concepts of race and language, at some point I think I settled on the strategy that Signithia Fordham calls racelessness. I cultivated the unaccented voice: the voice of teachers and TV newscasters. Or, I should say, the voice that I heard as unaccented. In reality, what I was working toward, rather than an invisible accent, was an accent of invisibility. In high school and college, I began to realize that though, in a sense, people couldn't avoid seeing me -- I was a high achiever academically and heavily involved in school activities -- they had a difficult time looking at my blackness. I was either the "good black," who didn't really reflect what other blacks were like, or I was not overtly black at all, except, or course, for purposes of "kidding" or "humor."

By the time I dropped out of a large, predominantly white Midwestern college after five confusing and frustrating years, I had begun to seriously doubt myself as a person and as a writer. I felt unsure of the commonality of our interests, darkness and mine, unsure of its presence within me or the meaning of that presence for me as a writer.

So the resolution I heard in Ms. Akbar's presentation in part reflects a resolution I've been seeking. And I wanted to maintain a certain distance in this discussion, to make it more about style, about discourse communities, about exclusion and otherness. There is a comfort in keeping this all academic, in every sense of that word, and in keeping at bay my own sense of loss. To an extent, I envied Ms. Akbar her conflict. I envied her knowing from whence she comes, even if it is a place not always valued.

Each of us has had to find our own answer to the question of style. But those answers relate integrally to race. Bakhtin writes about how our voices are always preceded by other voices and conversations. People of color know this, for at some point, we have to ask ourselves, "To which voices will I attend? Which

ones will I answer and echo?" For Ms. Akbar, the issue arose as the voice of her dialect came up against the accents of "school style." For me, the difficulty was more subtle and took longer to emerge. But emerge it did, and the answers began to come only when I attended to those "other" voices: Garcia Marquez, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Wideman, and I began to see possibilities for connections.

When I returned to college part-time, and for a semester attended a predominantly African-American university, I was immersed in an academic environment that offered the possibility of a different style, one to which, in terms of school, I had never been exposed. The first-year communications course I took there was more interactive and personal than the classrooms in which I had been. It had the feel of the arguments among my brothers and me growing up. And unlike my time in Colorado Springs, the teacher worked with the students' style rather than trying to exclude it. Here was a way of interacting very different from my other school experiences, and yet it worked.

Still, my concept of style did not begin to change until my first composition theory course a few years later. I realized that the rules of interaction might not be absolutely fixed, either right or wrong, that they might be rhetorical. When I went from my master's degree in creative writing to teaching in a community college classroom, the need for a different view of style took hold. It has not let go since.

That the textbooks I looked at maintained the notion of a unified, unchanging, a-rhetorical style only constituted part of the problem. My own experiences as a writer contradicted much of what I had been told about writing in journalism, as an English major, and in my creative writing program. I began to approach style not as a set of answers but as a set of questions that began with the kinds of questions my students asked me: Can you begin a sentence with but? Can you use "I" in a piece of writing? How should you start a paper? How should you end it? How should we organize it? Can we tell a story? Should we say what it means? What should we write about? The more I thought about the various kinds of writing I had done -- journalism, memos and reports, fiction, academic writing -- the more I wanted to begin again.

As a writer, I knew that the answers to those questions depended upon the relationships we try to call upon, respond to, and create through the text, relationships among ourselves, our audiences, and the subjects we choose. To use "I" is to say something about my role in a situation and about how I expect my audience to see my role. The act of writing about my upbringing in itself constitutes an argument that my experiences are worth discussing in a given context.

Traditionally, in our rhetoric and handbooks, we have divided content and form, and discussed style only as an aspect of the latter. We have treated style as a sort of transparent glass into which students can blithely pour the contents of their lives without altering the substance of themselves. But I now see style as a concept uniting form and content. How we are cannot be separated from who we are, and attempts to teach style which ignore that fact place students from outside the mainstream in

the position of choosing between the power of school style and the power of their own identity. But just as important, traditional teaching of style blinds students who are within the school style tradition to the politics of the language choices they face and the richness of language diversity.

Our teaching of style must recognize that every day, we translate ourselves. Our translations draw their meaning not from a-rhetorical rules, but from the web of relationships -- personal, social, cultural, economic, historical, racial -- that surround them. When we study style, then, we search for principles to unify our acts and our interpretations. We study the ways our ideologies come to life in specific language situations. Style lives at the point where we translate ideology into, as Burke would say, symbolic acts. And that translation, like all translations, is idiosyncratic and bound up in the strands of our experiences. In style, the ideological and personal grapple with and express each other.

This view of style demands a pedagogy that explores what bell hooks calls "the pleasure of interrogation." To engage in this pleasure, in this contestation, confusion, and hopefully subversion, requires that we be both personal and political. That pedagogy calls for neither self erasure nor self indulgence, but a rigorous awareness of both our identities and the identities of our audiences. It involves high-stakes negotiation, for if style means anything, it means that who we are -- all of who we are -- counts every time we write.

If we are lucky, we understand the history and complexity of the voices around us. If we are not, we have to go about excavating that past, piecing together our own histories. It means, as hooks writes, going on "the journey to a place we can never call home, even as we re-inhabit it to make sense of our present location." Part of my own exploration has been to figure out what counts for me, and reading "Representation of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," a clearer understanding develops for me of what I'm doing. I'm searching for a name for that which previously I've considered unnameable: fear, doubt, racism, questions of inferiority, questions about my own motivations, about the communities I will and do live in.

Style in this sense also means redefining ethos in writing. We must move from "How should I appear to be so that I can persuade?" to an ethos that asks, "What essential aspects of who I am do I want to make present in my texts?" And then, "Given the circumstances of this text and this audience, how can I present those aspects? How can I be who I feel I need to be?"

To answer these questions -- even to pose them -- alters our concept of teaching style as well as writing style. We can't teach critical theories and practices by speaking as stylistic guru to stylistic novice. We must engage the voices each person brings to the classroom, and we must negotiate with our students the rules of that engagement. It involves the kind of shift in outlook that anthropologist Renato Rosaldo argues for in his discipline, a shift implying that to explore and communicate with others, we need to understand and acknowledge our origins.

"All words," wrote Bakhtin, "have the taste of a profession,

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a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life...language, for the individual consciousness, lies at the borderline between self and other."

The composition classroom should explore that border, interrogate style, make visible and critique "the conventions of distance," the conventional and unconventional ways we interact through writing. But first we must admit that all voices are accented, and we must welcome those accents into our classroom.

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RESPONDENT (Jane E. Hindman) ADDS TO MICHAEL'S PAPER:

If we want to use the composition classroom as a place to acknowledge that all voices are accented and to welcome those accents into the room, then we need to re-define what we do therein. So, Michael and I developed together a curriculum that we hoped would highlight the culturally bound, conventional aspects of style, that would make visible and open to critique the implicit rules governing not merely academic discourse but the rules for interaction in many discourse communities. We are teaching that course right now, have been for the past two months. Though it's still early to be writing up and presenting our viewpoints on the success of this class (it's not over yet), we can share with you some of our thinking in setting up this course.

And so in conclusion today, I'd like to read to you directly from the syllabus I gave students the first day of this past semester. Without taking up too much of our time in explanation, this excerpt from the syllabus should give you all an idea of what it is that we hoped our course would accomplish, how we incorporated "our agenda" into that of the course itself, and what rationale we used to present our approach to our students (and our supervisor too, by the way). The course is called English 207; it's a sophomore composition course. This section from the students' syllabus that I'll read to you is called OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:

In your required first year composition course(s), you learned to produce competent essays for your university classes, but you may not developed an awareness of the ways in which language use differs among varying groups of speakers and/or writers. The claim that any definition of "good writing" is "subjective" (meaning "dependent on the perspective of

the subject evaluating the writing") is not merely a gripe that composition students have when they encounter the differences in diverse instructors' responses to students' writing. Though you have probably thought about the "subjective" and perhaps unreliable ways that individual instructors grade writing differently, you probably have not thought much about the ways that different discourse communities have quite varied but nonetheless systematic definitions of "effective" or "persuasive" or "clearly structured" writing and communication.

You probably have, however, read enough essays written by professionals to realize that to experienced writers, good essay writing involves not so much a focused thesis as a clear intention and meaningful purpose, not so much proper structure as effective design, not so much correct sentence structure as a lively and engaging voice. When writers begin to think more about moving and enriching their readers than about following strict formulas, they begin to improve their writing beyond the merely competent and ordinary; their work becomes more rewarding both for themselves and for their readers. But different readers are enriched and moved in different ways: what is engaging for The Wall Street Journal readers is not likely to enrich most readers of Rolling Stone. As a result, an experienced and effective writer must be able to understand the different values and beliefs of her or his readers so that s/he can determine what constitutes a meaningful purpose, an effective design, a lively and engaging voice for that particular group of readers on a certain topic for a specific occasion. In other words, good writing is dependent upon a careful analysis of and response to the unique rhetorical context of each writing task.

Thus, our approach to writing this semester will be to attend closely to the context of communication. We will study various and contrasting discourse communities and communicative contexts; the purpose of such study is to examine the diverse ways that

language is used in distinct contexts and to reflect on the meaning and significance of those differences. In particular, the primary text of the course, Kochman's Black and White Styles in Conflict, will focus our attention on race as a "window" through which to look at language; specifically, the text allows us to consider some generalized differences between the communicative styles of blacks and whites and some types of contexts of language use (for instance, the classroom, arguments, flirting, boasting and bragging). For the purposes of your own formal written assignments, you may decide to continue or challenge Kochman's exploration of the interface of race and language and of black and white styles in specific, or you may decide to focus on another discourse community(ies). Regardless of your preference, you will be required to examine in depth and on more than one occasion the language use of some other distinct discourse community from that of our classroom. So begin now to think about what group of speakers and uses of languages you are interested in studying and how you will make arrangements to observe and consult at length with at least one speaker from that group.

The course requirements include four major papers and a writer's sketchbook. Your major writing assignments will ask you to discover, reflect upon, and draw some conclusions about the meaning and significance of contrasts in language use between at least two different discourse communities; the assignments will examine several different communicative contexts. Each will require you to develop your ideas by means of at least one of these techniques: personal experience, library research, and field research--which includes various methods such as ethnography, interviews, surveys, questionnaires. All of your major assignments will be revised at least once. In order to facilitate your revisions of each assignment, we will have various in- and out-of-call workshop and conferences; you will also

be evaluated on your preparation, insight, and effectiveness in these sessions. In addition, you will read and discuss the writing of professional writers in order not only to practice formulating your own opinions and arguments about the meaning and significance of language use in various contexts but also to observe and reflect on the differences in communicative styles that occur in our own classroom.